

Scott
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The old farmhouse stood there in the narrow valley .
looking bleak and forlorn, the two-story front porch stretched
across its face in a mirthless smile. Its weather-boarded sides
had never known paint, but time had tinged them a gentle gray.
It was a good house, strongly constructed of logs under the
stripping, with a hewn stone chimney at one end. A dining room
and kitchen had been added to the back, forming an el. That
part of the house was just plain wood-frame with asphalt roofing
covering the outside for shelter against the wind. The front
door stood ajar, and the house was strangely silent as Zeb eased
himself down to the top step, favoring his right hip--the one he
threw out of joint when he kicked at the old sow and missed. He
wore a worried frown on his face and he sighed as he hitched up
the gallus of his faded blue overalls. No doubt about it--Zeb
couldn't work as he used to, and the occasional help he got from
his no-good nephew, Claud, was might^y unsatisfactory. He
wouldn't show up when you needed him, and if you didn't stand over
him he took forever to get a post hole dug. Zeb didn't get along
with him very well anyway. He reflected bitterly, as he sat resting
a minute where the big cedar tree cast a cool shade on the porch,
that his temper had always caused him trouble. Maybe if he hadn't
been so cross with the grandchildren, for instance, and so critical
of Julia, his daughter-in-law, things would have been different.

Up until a month ago, Zeb had allowed himself to hope that Lon and Julia, and their five youngsters, would remain at the farm. They had been there for four years and the children seemed to be doing all right in the one-room school a quarter of a mile away. Of course they had had a teacher there only six months last year, and this fall it appeared that they wouldn't reopen the school at all. Well, naturally, if you took five prospective pupils out of the community, chances for getting a teacher were just that much less. He knew that the school was the real issue, but when they had argued it out last month he had accused Julia of longing for the ease of "city" life. Not that Pine Center was such a city--but it did have two general stores and a post office. Most of the people had only small vegetable patches, and spent the summer, he suspected, sitting in the shade or gossiping over the back fence. They boasted a five-teacher school, which would appeal to Julia, but for Zeb's money a one-room school was plenty good enough.

Zeb cocked one ear for Molly, his wife, who should be coming from the spring with a bucket of water by now. Presently the screen door banged and Molly could be heard stirring the ashes down in the grate of the old wood cook stove. It was almost supper time. She wouldn't have to cook very much--not for just the two of them and old Blue Pup. Zeb wished the Pup would stop howling at night. Things were bad enough.

Reminiscing was just about all Zeb had left. He recalled how Lon had made plans to build a house for himself and his family up on the flat just out of sight of the old one. It was a nice place--and nearer the school. The farm had been stirring

with activity the year round. The three small boys and two girls added to the confusion, Zeb mused, but they had also been a part of his hope for the farm. In those days he had dreamed of prosperity for the future--it had somehow never been a part of his past. It didn't seem possible that the children were gone. He imagined he could hear them at play on the woodsy hillside where they had lately been building brush houses. It seemed that anyminute they should come galloping up on stick horses, old Blue Pup panting behind. He could still see the path worn in the grass where they used to chase each other around the house. How many times had he stormed at them to be quiet? Now it was so oppressively still that he was getting as lonesome as the Pup.

Johnny, the oldest boy, was getting just big enough to help in the fields. He liked to follow along the row, dropping three grains of corn and one seed bean in each hill as his grandfather made a place in the cool brown earth with his hoe. And he was a good hand to bring a cool drink of water in a little bucket from the spring when the sun grew hot in mid-morning and Zeb's blue chambray shirt was wet and clinging with sweat. Johnny was quick to learn, too. He knew that when the leaves turned wrong side out on the trees that rain was coming, even without a cloud in the sky. And he knew you shouldn't plant beans in the dark of the moon or plow when the ground was wet.

The smell of wood smoke reached Zeb's nostrils--Molly had a fire going and supper wouldn't take long. When it came to running a house, now, you couldn't beat Rosalie, the oldest grandchild, age 11. She liked to run and play with the best of them, but Julia could rely on her to take care of Baby Joe and keep a watchful eye on her younger sister, Laura, as well as

four-year-old Buster. In fact, she was quite bossy with them. She spoke with such authority that they usually obeyed her edicts without question. Zeb remembered one late afternoon when he was feeding the stock in the barn and the girls were playing in the hay loft. Laura, age 8, ^{eight} had chewed experimentally on a bright red leaf she found in the hay and Rosalie had said in alarm, "It might be poison!" Laura was thoroughly frightened. "What'll I do?", she wailed. Rosalie took immediate command. "Run to the house", she said. "Spit all the way. When you get there, rinse your mouth out with water--three times!" Zeb, looking through a crack in the barn, had seen Laura loping toward the house, spitting frantically. He calculated, with a wry chuckle, that her mouth must have been pretty dry by the time she got there. The remedy must have worked. She was fully recovered by supertime.

Zeb heard the crackle of sliced raw potatoes dropping in the hot grease in the black iron skillet. He could hear the flour sifter whirring, and wondered if Molly could be making biscuits. He recalled that Laura always wanted to turn the handle on the sifter. But she never liked to wash dishes after supper when her mother and grandmother were milking the cows. She would rather sit on the porch step with Zeb, or play hop scotch all alone in the path toward the front gate. Zeb couldn't say he blamed her. It was a nice time to be outside, especially when the peculiar light of the sunset brought out the vivid color of the green grass and "old maids" flowering by the brown picket fence around the garden. Then, as twilight fell, just to sit here where he was now, on the porch step, and listen to the night birds, the wind in the cedar, and the crickets chirping in the tall grass by

the chimney, was all one could ask for. Then he and Laura would watch little Buster and baby Joe playing near the step with discarded teaspoons in a pile of sand. Lon would be back of the house in the woodyard, cutting kindling and stacking stove-wood.

A year ago--six months ago--Zeb had been secure in all this. But now what would happen to the farm--and to Molly and him? The horses had been sold already. They had only one milk cow left. The bee hives under the persimmon tree just above the garden fence looked deserted. The meadow on the far side of the creek was growing up with tall tangled grass. It was getting to be late September and the place would soon look utterly forsaken. It seemed to Zeb that the altered appearance of the once well-kept farm had come about since he had written the letter. He took it out of his shirt pocket now and glanced through it. He wondered what Lon and Julia would think. But he didn't know what else to do but ask if he and Molly might find a place to live in Pine Center. He hoped they wouldn't mind too much. But most of all he worried about what Molly would think. He knew how much the farm meant to her. He knew she wouldn't like the idea of leaving it in the hands of Claud and his brood. They would run her flowers in no time. Claud would go around in the spring with that old blade of his, cutting weeds and shrubs alike. There wouldn't be any snowballs and lilacs left. Molly's prized snow-on-the-mountain borders and striped grass would just disappear. On the other hand, it might do her good to get away from the farm. If she could get more rest perhaps she could put some weight on her thin, tall frame. He sometimes tried to help her, but ended

up by getting in the way. He was just clumsy, she said. In Pine Center Molly wouldn't have to feed chickens or milk cows or carry water from a spring. She could sit in the porch swing and watch the people going by on their way to the store. Zeb put the letter back in his pocket--his mind made up. He would just have to get Molly to see it his way.

In the kitchen, Molly had a letter of her own. She sat down in a cane-bottom chair near the one window and reread it. She had brought it from the mailbox only that afternoon, and she couldn't decide whether to show it to Zeb or not. It was kind and generous of Lon and Julia to invite them to spend the winter--or make their home--with them in Pine Center. It would be best for them to do so, that was true. But to leave the farm! She knew what it would mean to Zeb. Not that he had ever been a real farmer. It wasn't that. But his heart was in the place. It was home to him--and to Molly, too, for that matter. But it had also meant hard work and poverty and doing without. It wasn't that Zeb couldn't earn a living, but his foolish spending for such things as an extra fine rifle or handy 3-in-one tool ate up whatever profit might have come from his farming or part-time surveying work. Like Zeb, Molly had hoped that Lon, or his younger brother Charlie, would take an interest in the farm, but it was plain now that it could never work out that way.

Molly took a lid off the stove and put another stick of wood on the fire. She was reminded of how hard it was to get anyone to cut and haul wood for them. She stirred the potatoes

and peeked at the apple pie in the oven. She wanted Zeb to have a good meal before she introduced the idea of leaving the farm. In a way, she looked forward to living at Pine Center. She would be relieved at not having to do the chores. Maybe Julia would allow her to putter around in the yard--she could carry along some cuttings from her own shrubs. Zeb would have more time to sit and dream, or sing do-re-mi out of his old shaped-note song book.

She opened the corner cupboard and reached for two plates and two cups and saucers. It still seemed queer, even after a month, to set so few places on the round dining room table. She had thought she would be glad to be free of the noise and clutter of the children. She thought it would be a relief to have the kitchen to herself. But now that Julia was gone she missed the company of another woman--somebody to voice a woman's complaints to--conversation that only another woman would understand. The grandchildren hadn't been so bad. What were a few crumbs on the floor? It was good to have somebody with an appetite around the house.

As Molly considered all these things, she began to feel that moving to Lon's and Julia's would be like going home. Maybe Zeb would feel that way too. Her mind was made up. Resolutely she called to him, "Supper's ready! I'm putting it on the table!"

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